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ABSTRACT

A first-year composition instructor designed a 3-week unit on folklore that fulfilled a requirement that students produce writing based on field research at some time during the semester. The unit begins with a discussion of the concepts of folklore, folklore genres, and the role that folklore serves in folk and ethnic groups and cultures, according to folklorists. Students then practice identifying folk groups and using field research techniques to observe, collect, and analyze an example of folklore. Next they submit a short research proposal for a field research project and a paper (five to six pages long). Students carry out their research and write their papers in the context of the composition class as they continue to learn about the writing process. They seem to enjoy working on their folklore field research projects, where their powers of observation as well as their writing skills are sharpened. (A definition of folklore; a diagram of the levels of culture; a characterization of folklore; a list of some familiar items of elite, popular, or folk culture; a list of the functions of folklore; a definition of folk group; a documentation form to guide students in their research; a list of genres of folklore; and a 54-item selected bibliography of folklore and education are attached.) (RS)

Folklore, Cultural Diversity, and Field Research in First-Year Composition

by

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Folklore, Cultural Diversity, and Field Research in First-Year Composition

According to Bronislaw Malinowski, "folklore is a mirror of culture" (qtd. in Simons 29). Folklore is all around us--in our families, in our communities, and in the academic community in which most of us work. I am not a professional folklorist. I am an English teacher with some years of experience teaching students to write in first-year composition and other courses. But I developed an interest in folklore when I took a folklore course in graduate school. I sensed even at that time that many of my own students would enjoy studying folklore as much as I did. When I began teaching first-year composition, I looked for ways to include folklore study in my classes. I did not have to look far. At the university where I taught, students in the first-year course were required to produce writing based on field research at some time during the semester.

This is not an unusual requirement. Many colleges and universities require students in first-year composition to write papers based on the primary or field research used often in many fields across the curriculum, including biology, education, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. Such assignments require that students learn such valuable field research, ethnographic, and critical thinking skills as observing people, places, and activities; interviewing; taking surveys; analyzing and synthesizing the research material from theoretical perspectives; and writing the results of one's analysis and synthesis in a focused, organized, and lively paper. Most field research writing also calls for skill in narrative and descriptive writing--forms of writing usually taught in first-year

composition, most often at the beginning of the term. Since my students were required to write a short field research project, I thought, why not have them choose a topic from the folklore they could observe in their own lives and the community around them. A folklore research project could also give them the opportunity to learn more about the richness of the folklore, the traditions, and the cultural diversity in American society.

I have designed a curriculum unit for a field research project that takes about three weeks to complete. The students follow the three steps that Simons outlines for studying folklore "identification, collection, and analysis" (29). My design of this curriculum was strongly influenced by the work of Dr. Rachelle H. Saltzman, a public sector folklorist who teaches an Introduction to Folklore course at the University of Delaware. I first introduce the concepts of folklore and folklore genres and discuss the roles that folklorists theorize that folklore serves in folk and ethnic groups and cultures. Students then practice identifying folk groups and using field research techniques to observe, collect, and analyze an example of folklore. Next they submit a short research proposal for a field research project and paper (the final drafts of these field research papers are to be five to six pages long). They carry out their research and write their papers in the context of our composition class in which we continue to learn about the writing process as we go through the unit. The students continue to practice prewriting (field research is one form of prewriting), drafting, reading each other's work and giving and receiving feedback about their writing, revising, and editing their final drafts.

Since my first-year composition course is not primarily a folklore course, I need to provide some background information and readings for students that are not included in a regular reader and grammar handbook. I recommend putting these two books on reserve for students to read: George H. Schoemaker's The Emergence of Folklore in Everyday Life, an excellent and readable introduction to the genres and functions of folklore, and Peter Bartis's Folklife and Fieldwork: A Layman's Introduction to Field Techniques, Revised Edition, a pamphlet which outlines the basic techniques of field research for the novice. The focus of my folklore curriculum unit is on field research, although students are expected to refer to the background readings and lecture material in the papers using the correct citation forms in Modern Language Association style. This curriculum could easily be adapted, however, to teach students library research skills by having students do library research on the subject of their folklore project.

Let me walk you through the curriculum as I teach it. My unit is outlined for a class that meets two days a week for an hour and a half. The first day I introduce the subject of folklore. I provide examples of some folk art and household objects (a sampler, a quilt, and an old iron skillet) and some pictures of Amish barns with barn designs. While these are being circulated, I play audiotapes of the performance of a blues singer in a small local cafe. I have students brainstorm what these kinds of objects and activities might have in common. Then I provide them with the following definition of folklore from Jan Harold Brunvand's book, The Study of American Folklore: An

Introduction (see Appendix A). I explain that our next writing project will involve field research focused on a folklore subject of their choosing.

What is and is not folklore can be a difficult subject for students to grasp. I next explain some of the differences among the elite, the popular, and the folk levels of culture (see Appendix B). In general, the elite level of culture consists of the academic or progressive culture. It is most influenced by the norms and preferences of the educated people in a society. The elite tradition is passed on by print or other formal means. The popular culture refers to the normative, mass, and mainstream culture and is transmitted also by formal means. It is perhaps the level of culture most influenced by the mass media. The folk culture is the traditional level of culture passed on by informal means, by word of mouth or by customary examples. As one folklorist put it, it exists in the "interstices," or between spaces, of culture. All of us are part of a folk culture and possess folklore.

Actually, as students soon learn, the levels of culture are constantly interacting and influencing each other, especially with today mass media and international communication networks. I explain more about the characteristics of folklore (see Appendix C). To make sure they are beginning to grasp the differences among the levels of culture and to understand that folklore is part of their everyday lives, I ask them to identify some familiar items as belong to elite, popular, or folk culture (see Appendix D). Students enjoy this activity.

Well, if folklore exists all around them, students sometimes ask, why is it there? What functions does folklore serve? Folklore is indeed found in every culture and appears to serve similar functions in most cultures. To help answer this question, I discuss Simons's list of the functions of folklore with students (see Appendix E). Interpretations of the functions of folklore range from the antropological and the sociological (and now the semiotic) to the psychological, including the Freudian and Jungian approaches. As they learn when they read Schoemaker's book, certain forms of folklore have certain specialized functions. Sick joke cycles like the Challenger joke cycle help relieve our anxieties about death, while the charitable giving often associated with festivals and holiday celebrations serves to redistribute wealth in the community. When the students write their field research papers, they will need to analzye the functions of the folklore items they have chosen to describe and explain. They will get a chance to practice critical thinking skills in determining not only the form of the folklore they are describing but its function and meaning.

During the last part of the first class, I introduce the concept of folkgroups. Folklore appears in groups and serves to bond groups together. But what is a folkgroup (see Appendix F)? We brainstorm as a class for possible folkgroups. Students usually mention various ethnic groups, but regional groups and occupational groups--like fishermen, lacemakers, and academics--also are folkgroups with a distinctive folklore. That takes care of the first day. The students then begin their reading in Schoemaker and Bartis. They are also to write a two-page paper describing a folk group they belong to. They

must outline the criteria for group membership, how an individual becomes part of that group, and how he or she recognizes others in the group. This paper is due the following week.

On the second class day, we begin to discuss and practice field research techniques. We review the suggestions in the Bartis book carefully. I emphasize the importance of observation and note-taking skills. We discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of using a tape recorder. The students must turn in all their field notes with their final projects. We discuss interviewing techniques and what questions are useful to ask.

Context and background information are important in folklore research. The students need to watch carefully for what is said and what is happening when they are observing folklore. They can also talk to informants about the meaning the folklore has for them. It can be a valuable source of information, for example, to ask a joke teller under what circumstances he or she tells a particular joke and why he or she thinks the joke is funny. The students spend the rest of the class practicing interviewing techniques on each other. For the next class session, students are required to collect and record one folklore item or text, which will include notes about dates, descriptions of places, informants, performance details, and the student's preliminary ideas about the messages and meaning of the text. I give students a Documentation Form to use as a guide in their field research (see Appendix G).

On the third class day, we begin by having students peer critique their folk group essays in small writing groups. While they are working on their peer critiques, I look over their folklore

documentation and make comments and suggestion. The final draft of the folk group essays are due the next class day.

We next discuss the genres of folklore, the different forms folklore can take (see Appendix H). I provide examples of the various genres and ask students to come up with others. It helps to show students folk objects, photographs, audiotapes, and videotapes whenever possible. Students may have noticed lawn ornaments (a form of folk are), but not have seen rural mailbox decoration, for example. Once they get going, however, students can usually think of good examples of the various genres from their daily lives. When discussing jokes, for example, I explain the concept of a joke cycle by asking students to tell whatever jokes they know about the Challenger disaster or about blonds. It usually surprises them how many of them heard the same jokes. At the end of class, students turn in their field work notes and commentary on the folklore text they observed.

For the following class day, which is the fourth, the students will complete their assigned reading in Schoemaker. They also need to choose a topic for their final folklore field research project, which can be connected to the same folk group and folklore text as they have written about in previous assignments. Their final projects must include all their fieldnotes, transcripts, and other documentation and a copy, photograph, or audiotape of the folklore text, object, or performance they chose to observe. They must also write a five- to six-page paper in which they give a definition of the folk group and genre they picked, provide a complete description of the context or performance situation, explain any needed background information, and

explore the meaning and function of that folklore genre and specific text, object, or performance for the folk group members. All references to the reading we have done are to be cited in correct Modern Language Association style.

For the fourth class day, students also need to type a short (one-page) field research project proposal. The research proposal should include an explanation of their topics; a description of the performance or other context; a description of the informants; a timeline for completing the observations, interviews, and notetaking; and an outline of the paper. They are to complete their observations and notetaking within a week.

On the fourth class day, students turn in their final drafts of the folk group essays. They review and critique each other's field research proposals in writing groups, making comments about the choice of topic and the feasibility of carrying out the field research in the time allowed. We spend a little time discussing student and academic folklore: the urban legends told in dormitories, fraternity and sorority folklore practices (like hazing and initiation rites), the nicknames students give their professors, the stories they tell about them, and so forth. I share with them Barre Toelken's observations in his essay "The Folklore of Academe" spend the rest of the class period and all the next class period (the fifth) having individual conferences with students about their research proposals and their field research writing in progress.

On the sixth class day (or at the end of three weeks), students meet in their writing groups to peer critique their field research

project papers. Final drafts are due by the next class day, at which time we leave our folklore projects.

Students seem to enjoy working on their folklore field research projects. Popular topics have included folk festivals like the Greek festival at the local Greek Orthodox Church, velvet paintings, practical jokes in the dormitory, egg shell art, door decorations on faculty offices, Afro-American personal names, and street mime performances. Students sharpen their powers of observation as well as their writing skills. They look with new eyes at the diversity (and the common themes) of the folklore in the university and the larger community around them. They invest themselves in their writing and produce lively papers. I can think of no more engaging way to teach field research and writing skills than by having students study the folklore around them.

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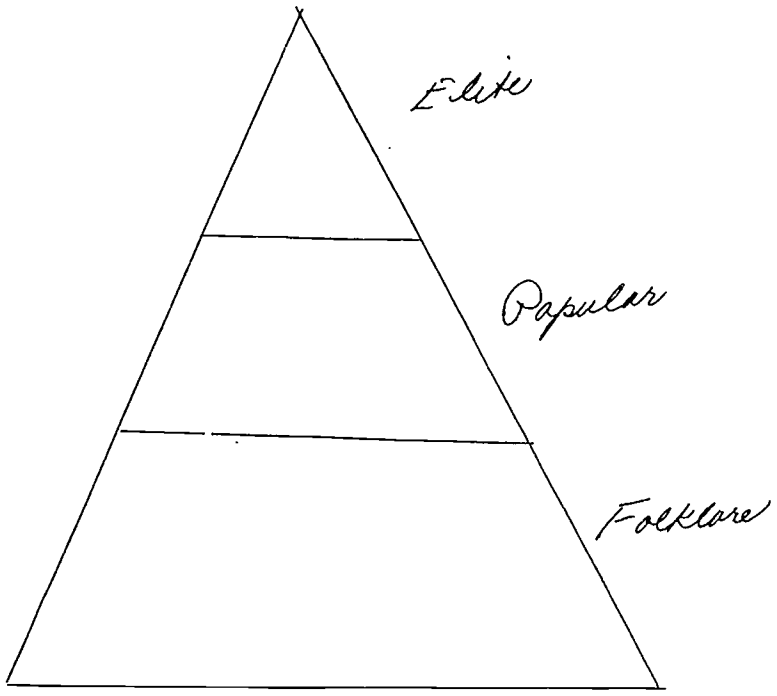
APPENDIX A

FOLKLORE: the traditional, unofficial, noninstitutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples . . . . Folklore manifests itself in many oral and verbal forms . . ., in . . . customary behavior . . ., and in material forms . . ., but folklore itself is the whole traditional complex of thought, content, and process which ultimately can never be fixed or recorded in its entirety; it lives only in its performance or communication as people interact with one another.

Source: Brunvand, Jan Harold. The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 1986, p. 4.

Appendix B

Levels of Culture



APPENDIX C

1. Folklore is passed from one person to another.

2. Folklore changes when it is transmitted from person to person, resulting in different versions.

3. Folklore is traditional.

4. Much folklore is anonymous in origin.

Source: Simons, Elizabeth Radin. Student Worlds Student Words: Teaching Writing Through Folklore. Boynton/Cook/ Heinemann, 1990, pp. 17-19.

APPENDIX D

1. The Simpsons
2. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony
3. Monopoly (the Parker Brothers game)
4. children playing house
5. holding up the index finger to indicate you're "Number One"
6. a snowman
7. Shakespeare's King Lear
8. slumber parties
9. Disneyland
10. Alumni Weekend
11. the movie, The Rocky Horror Picture Show
12. tying a shoelace
13. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales
14. cheerleading
15. videogames

Adapted from Byington, Robert H. "Introduction to Folklore." Teaching Folklore. Ed. Bruce Jackson. Buffalo, NY: Documentary Research, 1984. (18-32).

APPENDIX E

Functions of Folklore

1. Folklore entertains.

2. Folklore instructs and educates.

3. Folklore validates culture, but it can also violate cultural norms, providing an avenue to break the rules, literally and symbolically. This is what William Bascom calls the "basic paradox of culture."

4. Folklore offers relief from troubling matters.

5. Folklore bonds people into groups.

Source: Simons, Elizabeth Radin. Student Worlds Student Words: Teaching Writing Through Folklore. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1990.

APPENDIX F

FOLK GROUP: "'any group of people who share at least one common factor.' The common factor creates a sense of collective identity . . . . This sense of identity can be based upon such salient social factors as ethnicity, occupation, kinship, religious belief, sex, or age."

Source: Oring, Elliott. "On the Concepts of Folklore." Folk Groups Folklore Genres: An Introduction. Ed. Elliott Oring. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 1986, p. 1.

Appendix G

Informant Data:

Contextual Data:

Social Context:

Cultural Context:

Text:

Your name and age
Your home address
Your school address
Your school
Course number
Semester/quarter and year

Source: Wilson, William A. "Documenting Folklore." Folkgroups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction. Ed. Elliott Oring. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 1986, p. 246.

APPENDIX H

GENRES OF FOLKLORE

I. Folk Literature and Folk Speech

- A. Folk Speech (Including Place and Personal Names)
- B. Folk Narratives (Legends, Urban Legends, Tales, Riddles, and Jokes)
- C. Xerox Lore

II. Folk Belief (Including Superstitions) and Folk Medicine

III. Material Folklore

- A. Folk and Ethnic Arts
- B. Folk Crafts and Folk Architecture
- C. Leisure, Rural, and Occupational Arts
- D. Textiles and Foodways

IV. Performance Folklore

- A. Folk Music and Song
- B. Folk Drama and Dance
- C. Folk Festivals and Public Display Events
- D. Folk Rituals
- E. Folk Games

APPENDIX I

Folklore and Education--A Selected Bibliography

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Folklore Forum
Folklore Women's Communication
Foxfire
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Both of the two books above are available from the Information Office, Box A, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540.

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P.O. Box 265
White Springs, FL 32096

This bibliography was prepared with the assistance of Dr. Nancy Nusz, Director, Oregon Folk Arts Program, Oregon Historical Society, Portland, Oregon.